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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Lost in transition: What refugee post-migration experiences tell us about processes of social identity change

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## Abstract

This paper presents findings based on over 40 hrs of rich, phenomenological narrative interview data in which five Syrian refugees describe their experiences of transitioning to a new life in Brazil. Using the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) as a framework for examining the relationship between a period of vulnerability, multiple social identities and wellbeing, interviews were combined with a “talking stones” technique. Key themes of identity “recovery” and “discovery” were consistent with the identity “gain” and “continuity” components of SIMIC. A theme of “adaptation” suggested that a process of continual identity construction and reconstruction is central to both outcomes. Further, themes relating to identity “constraint” suggests how some contexts can actively freeze identities, thus undermining agency and compromising wellbeing. The refugee stories analysed in this paper demonstrate how the SIMIC is a robust model for capturing many of the identity complexities within post-migration life. Please refer to the supplementary material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

## KEYWORDS

adaptation, narrative interview, post-migration stress, refugee, SIMIC, social identity, talking-stones, wellbeing

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With the global rise of refugees to almost 26 million in 2020 (UNHCR, 2010), research has demonstrated the importance of psycho-social factors in understanding refugee stress and wellbeing in post-migration life (Alfadhli, Güler, Cakal, & Drury, 2019; Beiser, Johnson, & Turner, 1993; Iyer & Jetten, 2011; James, Iyer, & Webb, 2019; Li, Liddell, & Nickerson, 2016; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). This observation emerged as the psychological problems associated with post-migration life have been found to be equal to, if not greater than, the trauma and adversity directly arising from experiences of conflict or persecution (Meyer 2013; Ventevogel 2017). Muldoon and Lowe (2012) and Mahendran, Magnusson, Howarth, and Scuzzarello (2019) highlight how being a member of an underprivileged group, or a group that has become stigmatised through the imposition of identities such as an “asylum-seeker” or “refugee,” further contributes to many of the challenges migrants face. Through a qualitative analysis of five Syrian refugee case-studies in Brazil, this paper explores a significant aspect of this post-migration life that of social identity change.

## 2 | IDENTITY AS SOCIAL CURE OR SOCIAL CURSE

There is a strong evidence base for the role of social identity in psychological health and the management of stress (Haslam et al., 2008; Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005; Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Jetten, Haslam, Iyer, & Haslam, 2010; Muldoon et al., 2017), more often referred to as the “social cure” (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012). The ‘social cure’ is demonstrated in how social identity, which refers to the sense of self a person derives from their membership to social groups (Tajfel, 1974, 1982; Turner, 1987), supports both physical and mental wellbeing through meeting a number of important psychological needs and enabling resources (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009; Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2010), as well as operating as a buffer against stress and adversity (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; Muldoon et al., 2017). For refugees, we suggest that the social cure may arise through meeting psychological needs such as a sense of belonging, or a means to make sense of the losses they have incurred.

But the evidence also speaks to social identity as a potential “curse.” Of particular relevance to the refugee experience, Kellezi, Bowe, Wakefield, McNamara, and Bosworth (2019) demonstrate how shared identities among migrants held in detention centres provide both sources of meaning, support and understanding as well as being sources of burden, ostracism and distress. The potential for social curse or cure is precarious; identity resources that may empower and support refugees in one context, may constrain and disable in another.

## 3 | SOCIAL IDENTITY MODEL OF IDENTITY CHANGE (SIMIC)

The multitude of social, economic, political influences brought to bear on refugee identity may mean that the otherwise strong relationship between group membership and wellbeing is clouded. As such, adopting a social identity change perspective, in which the impact of continually changing self-definitions is brought to the fore (Turner, 1987), may afford insights into the role social identity plays in post-migration life. Specifically, SIMIC (Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2010) provides a framework in which the role of multiple past identities serves to maintain and enhance wellbeing following a period of significant transition. SIMIC describes how access to multiple social identity groups provides resources to navigate the challenges that a new environment presents. It also demonstrates how the maintenance of these identities provides an important sense of identity continuity, which in turn serves to secure an overall coherent sense of self. With this social platform in place, Iyer et al. (2009) and others (Bentley, Peters, Haslam, & Greenaway, 2019; Ng, Haslam, Haslam, & Cruwys, 2018) have demonstrated how new identities can be acquired. Bentley et al.'s (2019) findings develop SIMIC by demonstrating the importance of identity construction.

Meaningful pathways are required that enable old, new and future identities to cohere, thus reducing the threat posed to self-continuity and allowing wellbeing to be maintained.

As Deaux (1999) argues, “we don’t know a great deal about the patterns of identity change, but immigration is an ideal arena for analysing these change processes in more detail” (p. 428). As SIMIC has not yet been used to examine the post-migration life of refugees, there is an opportunity to explore particular challenges within the refugee community from a social identity change perspective. Specifically, some refugees may have little or no opportunity to bring aspects of their old life to their new one. Social identity maintenance may be very difficult and compromised from the outset. There are also often significant socio-cultural differences in terms of language and beliefs that make identity continuity difficult, and from the moment people are forced to leave their homes they become defined by institutional and bureaucratic processes that create reified and inflexible identity structures, such as being an “internally displaced person” or simply a ‘refugee.’

## 4 | THE PRESENT STUDY

We argue, like Alfadhli and Drury (2018) that the post-migration “daily” (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010) or “secondary” stressors (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018; Li et al., 2016) that refugees face, such as lack of employment (Beiser et al., 1993), poverty (Simich, Hamilton, & Baya, 2006) or legal uncertainties (Warfa et al., 2012), have socially mediated consequences and as such may implicate social identity to a greater or lesser degree. Therefore, there is a need to understand the conditions under which identity enables or obstructs the transition to a new life for refugees.

In the context of these stressors, this study asks what processes of identity change and stability do Syrian refugees experience, and how far do these correspond to the dimensions of SIMIC. To date, SIMIC has demonstrated its theoretical value among homogenous populations within relatively stable environments. But real-life post-migration experiences are complex and ambiguous. We examine whether and how these social identity processes operate among non-western (Henrich et al., 2010) participants in the context of forced migration and the degree to which SIMIC can similarly explain more complex identity change phenomena. In addition, this research develops a methodological approach—“talking stones”—which we suggest is required to meet the novel contextual challenges of social identity research in a post-migration environment.

## 5 | METHOD

### 5.1 | Participants

Over the course of 2 years, five in-depth case studies with Syrian refugees<sup>1</sup> were collected. Interviews generated between 6 and 10 hr of material per participant, approximating over 40 hr of interview material in total. Those interviewed were three men and two women who had come to Brazil within the past 5 years, either through private sponsorship or through the Brazilian humanitarian visa scheme introduced in 2012 (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Their ages ranged from 21 to 45 years. All participants were contacted through a personal referral by the Instituto Migrações e Direitos Humanos (IMDH),<sup>2</sup> a charitable organisation in Brazil. Once contact was made, participants were given information packs in both English and Portuguese explaining the purpose of the research along with information about their rights, confidential practices and a consent form. This was discussed again in detail, in person and in Arabic prior to any consent being signed. Four further potential participants were identified and discussed the research but were unwilling to consent primarily due to concerns about their security. As interviews took place on multiple occasions over several weeks, verbal consent was sought prior to each meeting to ensure they were content to continue.

### 5.1.1 | Participant one

Alea<sup>3</sup> is a Syrian refugee who came to Brazil directly from Damascus in 2014. As the family is Christian, she left Syria after her husband received death threats for refusing to convert to Islam. Alea arrived in Brasilia with her husband, two young children and was pregnant with her third child. Since coming to Brazil, Alea set up her own business making Syrian food, which she sells to local Brazilians and organisations within the city. Her husband, formerly a civil engineer, has been unable to find work. Five in-depth interviews, approximately 2 hr each, with an Arabic translator took place over a period of 6 months.

### 5.1.2 | Participant two

Walid came to Brazil alone in 2014, having first fled to Turkey with his parents and siblings after the conflict threatened the lives of his family. He is a qualified, post-graduate engineer, but his licence to work is not recognised in the Brazilian system. He travelled within Brazil to find work, returning to Brasilia where he met his wife and became a father. He continues to work in a low-income occupation cleaning buses. Walid is a practicing Muslim. Three in-depth interviews, approximately 3 hr each, were carried out in English.

### 5.1.3 | Participant three

Masud arrived in Brazil in 2014 directly from Syria with his wife (Aseel, see participant four below) and three children. Whilst they tried to stay during the fight, a bombing raid on the children's school bus made it impossible. Originally settling in another city, they came to Brasilia in the hope of finding work. Masud ran a clothing business in Syria, but in 2016 set up a small café in Brasilia selling Syrian food. Masud is a Muslim. Four in-depth interviews, approximately 3 hr each, were carried out, with an Arabic translator.

### 5.1.4 | Participant four

Aseel is the wife of Masud, arriving with him and their three children in 2014. Aseel did not work in Syria, but has since taken to running the café with her husband. She also manages all the housework and childcare. Like her husband, Aseel is a practicing Muslim. Three in-depth interviews were carried out with an Arabic translator.

### 5.1.5 | Participant five

Khalid came to Brazil in 2012, when a friend working at the Brazilian Embassy in Syria made arrangements to help him leave. Khalid decided to leave Syria due to his personal experience of intolerance within Syria, where discrimination against different religious groups was becoming more evident. Khalid is a practicing Muslim and has worked for many years, both in Syria and Brazil, as a dog trainer. Five, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 2 hr each were carried with support from an Arabic translator over the period of a month.

## 5.2 | Procedure

During the course of this two-year period, the principal author lived in Brazil and spent time meeting, participating and learning about the post-migration life of Syrian refugees. Time was spent in the home of refugees, meeting them

in a variety of social spaces and participating in organised events focused on social and economic development. As a white, British, female researcher investing in this time was critical in establishing familiarity and trust. A research journal of all these experiences was kept, enabling reflection on the ethnographic aspects of the research.

Apart from the interview with Walid, all interviews were interpreted in real time with an American-Egyptian Arabic volunteer interpreter, Ayya.<sup>4</sup> Ayya volunteered to take part in the project and she was given guidance based on Tribe and Thompson's (2017) "Working with Interpreters in Health setting: Guidelines for Psychologists." Training was also provided for both the principal researcher and the interpreter in terms of working with refugees, based on Tribe's (2007) guidance, in particular, recognising possible, culturally specific, "idiom of distress" (Tribe, 2008). Each participant was introduced to Ayya and gave consent for her to be present. Ayya was also required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The research was approved by the ethics committee at Lancaster University.<sup>5</sup> All the information and consent forms were translated for each participant by the interpreter.

## 6 | METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### 6.1 | Narrative and identity landscapes

The importance of social and subjectively meaningful aspects of a person's life has often been demonstrated through the use of narrative (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016; Gergen & Gergen, 1983; McAdams & McLean, 2016). It allows key social relationships, from which self-categorisations and identity groups form to be captured as the story touches on the conversations and relationships that have been meaningful in their lives. Taking this approach, we considered these narratives as "landscapes of identity" (Deaux, 2000). Mapping these different journeys and experiences allows us to identify key self-categorisations and social groups. We invited each participant to tell the story of their experiences since coming to Brazil, allowing them to relay their story in whatever way felt most comfortable, keeping questions to a minimum.

### 6.2 | Timelines and talking stones

To assist the interview process, two techniques were used. First, a timeline was laid out (placing a ribbon on the table) with one end representing their arrival in Brazil. This provided a structure around, which an identity landscape could be built. Second, we adapted Wearmouth's (2004) "talking stones" approach, in which the participant was invited at various points within their story to select a stone from a random assortment of stones of differing colours and textures to represent an event or aspect of themselves. Rather than asking the participant to list, which social identities were important in their lives at various points, the use of the stones provided a way to give coherence and definition to certain concepts, or version of events, which may otherwise be too difficult, painful or linguistically challenging to share (Wearmouth, 2004). This projective technique enabled the participant to invest meaning in an otherwise meaningless object, which in turn became a social identity marker in their story. Using the stones in this way, different aspects of the participant's social identity were richly described by using simple prompts, for example: "Can you find a stone that would represent the other people at this time who aren't like you? What makes them different?" (A more detailed explanation of the technique and associated prompts can be found in supporting materials).

### 6.3 | Analysis

The interviews in this research offered rich, idiographic accounts of the participants' experiences of post-migration life. Each story is a unique account in which the social self is constructed and re-constructed as the experiences are

shared with the interviewer. Each subsequent interview also began with a reflection on the previous (aided by a photograph taken from the previous session) whereupon the participant could challenge aspects of their own story or re-express it in different ways. Further insights were discussed and shared between the interpreter and interviewer after each interview, to support the analytical process.

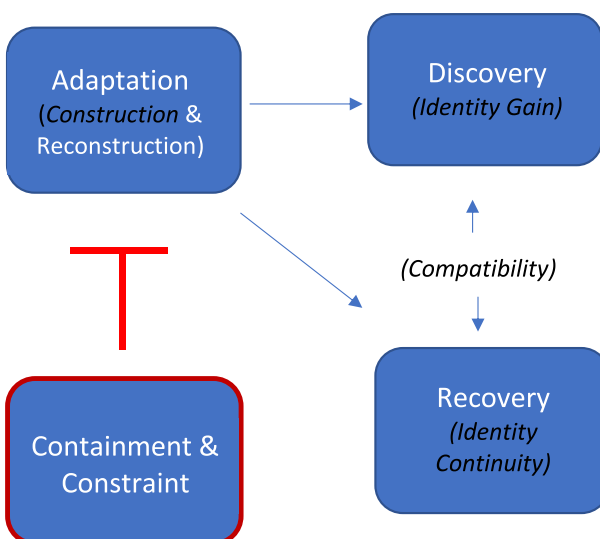
All recordings were listened then transcribed in full. Transcripts were coded using NVivo software. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was considered to provide the greatest flexibility in meeting these requirements. The analysis examined whether features of SIMIC (Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2010) were present and if they added explanatory value in the participant's accounts. This involved identifying aspects within the narrative that described pre-migration identities, the maintenance of these pre-existing identities, social identities gained post-migration and aspects of psychological health and wellbeing. Once the coding was complete, unifying themes were identified and explored. Those, which either challenged or elaborated the features of SIMIC were particularly significant to the analysis.

## 7 | RESULTS

Thematically, the principles of social identity change were identified as two adaptation processes: identity "discovery" (a new addition to one's sense of self), and identity "recovery" (an old identity being maintained in the present), thus supporting SIMIC as well as the role of social identity construction (Bentley et al., 2019) and 'adaptation' to wellbeing. Developing Bentley et al.'s (2019) findings, re-construction of past-social identities were just as relevant to the identity gain pathway (discovery) as current or future constructions of self. The research also revealed how social identity constraints have the potential to shape identity continuity and gain pathways and are, therefore, important in how change and wellbeing are experienced (Figure 1).

### 7.1 | Theme one: Adaptation (construction and reconstruction)

In the interviews, the theme of construction reflected the importance of "becoming": the ability to build an emerging identity. By having the opportunity to access multiple identity resources, which were often not available in Syria,



**FIGURE 1** A thematic map identifying the themes along with key theoretical principles from SIMIC (in parenthesis)

participants were able to think or behave in ways that introduced possible, future selves. Whilst such experiences were daunting, they often had the potential to facilitate constructive change:

Because of the time of my life here, I am trying to start the construction of some dream, so I am doing the constructing the base, this must be strong. (Walid)

As previous studies have shown (e.g., Haslam et al., 2005; Jetten et al., 2010; Reicher & Haslam, 2006), simply belonging to a group is not enough to benefit from its resources. For groups to confer their wellbeing advantages, the group must be subjectively self-defining (Turner, 1982). Among the participants' stories, there were many examples of the positive wellbeing effects arising from this identification process, particularly for the women who, having not worked in Syria, were forming a new identity around work, which was previously the sole preserve of their husbands. In this example, Aseel is asked what it feels like to start work, and to select a stone to represent this:

I felt like I was present in life... [selects small green stone] ... I picked it because it shines, it looks like it shines, so it was like the shine of a beginning, a new beginning for me. (Aseel)

These new beginnings, however, were often met with conflict as roles and expectations change within existing family groups. Sometimes these new identities gains would mean no longer feeling they could engage in normative behaviours associated with their old self. Here, Alea talks about what is, and is not, acceptable for her as the salience of her identity within the family shifted from mother to breadwinner:

Now I'm not the mum of love anymore, I'm not able to hug them and kiss [my children] I can't. So here for me I feel like we kind of traded places, whereas my husband's the one who's kissing and hugging and spoiling and singing and I'm the one who's working. (Alea)

This aligns with SIMIC findings, which shows how the impact on wellbeing through the acquisition of new identities is complex. Whilst a new identity has been gained, its relationship to an important old identity that of 'mum' is perceived as incompatible. A similar but more stark example of this is given by Aseel. To family in Syria, the perceived violations of fundamental social norms relating to her religion and gender carried significant consequences:

I'm doing things that isn't, like, permissible...So like, if I went back and they saw that I'm working and I'm not wearing my hijab, they [family in Syria] sent me a message saying ...if you come back, we'll kill you. (Aseel)

## 7.2 | Theme two–Discovery (gain)

Present within all the narrative accounts were examples of 'Discovery,' where positive identity gains occurred because of the identity changes that occurred in post-migration life. Some of these related specifically to the contrast in gender roles between Syria and Brazil:

In Syria I was a housewife...I would just take care of the kids and go get stuff for the house and that's it. There's nothing in the old Aseel here present. When I started working, I felt like I was, you know, present in life, not feeling like I was just part of the furniture...I felt like I had a reason. (Aseel)

Similarly, as Alea's account shows, the opportunity for re-definition aligns with gain pathways in SIMIC whereby the stresses of post-migration life are offset by the opportunities for positive growth (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009):



I'm not going to say it was a positive moment from the war, but positive moment of me leaving my country, I started to bloom or open...These types of things are what makes a person stronger and changes them, like a lot of times I would have never thought that I would become this person and be able to do the things that I'm doing. (Alea)

Whilst there was little choice to be had for those looking to establish a new life in Brazil, those that were given space and opportunity for identity construction to take place reported the greatest positive impact on wellbeing. Where it was possible to make such changes personally meaningful, and where existing identities could be re-configured to enable compatibility, greater day to day wellbeing ensued:

When I went out to the park I decided I'm not going to wear [the hijab]. So, when I took the kids out...nobody recognised me. They were like, "Are these your kids? Are you the same person who came every day?," and I said, "Yeah, I was the same person." I felt happy 'cos I was able to make that decision, I had the courage to do it. I just felt that I was stronger. (Aseel)

### 7.3 | Theme three—Recovery (continuity)

Participants often referred to an existing identity, which seem to transcend the migration experience. More often than not these accounts related to family, religion culture. They serve as a means to reconnect to important values or needs. In this extract, Walid describes the need to adhere to the social rules prescribed by his family in order to sustain his identification with them:

I talk with them, so preserving these roots, I feel that that my parents are present in my life. Because if I break these rules, it will be worse...But...honouring these rules that they give to me, I feel that I am still close to them. When I break any one of these rules I feel that I now I will feel that I'm really lonely. (Walid)

Walid goes on to talk about the continuity of family identity in terms of its present psychological value: "treasure." The salience of family identity supports his recovery as it still yields important identity resources from which he can draw strength:

I think it's my fortune, as I don't have money, but at least in my life what I have as treasure; this feeling, and always they tell me that "we trust in you, we are proud of you and we are praying for you to get more success." So, I feel this way, I feel that really I have support. (Walid)

Similarly, Masud describes the cultural connection that keeps his past self, present and the importance this has for his general, albeit temporary, wellbeing. He frequently talks about playing music of the popular Lebanese singer Fairuz, smoking cigarettes and drinking cardamom coffee. His moments of nostalgia align with findings from Wildschut, Sedikides, and Alowidy (2019) that suggest moment like these allow him to bolster his self-esteem and find continuity between past and present. Whilst there is little cultural compatibility to allow an important identity to endure, he finds ways to access his past and uses that to shore-up his sense of self, ready to face the next challenge:

There's times when I feel like I have to escape home, not go home, escape to home...Because you know it's not the place for it here, the people have to see me in a different face. "Fairuz" is like coffee, like cigarettes, like perfume. Those are things that are how do they say it, like of importance, priorities. The feeling that comes to me is that I return to the person...I'm pure. (Masud)

Respite and wellbeing should not be conflated, however. Iyer and Jetten (2011) would suggest the lower levels of continuity arising from the incompatibility between Syrian and Brazilian culture may negatively impact on two aspects of wellbeing: perceived ability to cope and interest in new opportunities. Masud's experiences demonstrate how identity continuity can be both cure and curse: a means to re-connect to a past, more meaningful sense of self as well as a form of resistance to accepting what has changed.

Alea similarly shows how important compatibility is for the effective recovery of an existing identity, and the impact it has on wellbeing. In her account, she describes the tension that existed whenever she spoke to her parents in Syria on Facetime from her apartment in Brasília. Whilst initially the social contact was an invaluable source of support, over time she found these conversations required more pretence and so became more difficult. The connection to her mother would make her old identity salient, which was increasingly difficult to reconcile psychologically or emotionally. As these examples show, a Facetime call, or visit from her mother sat at odds with the changed version of herself in Brazil:

No, I don't like [to Face Time with my mum] [sighs]. It's hard to. I don't like talking to her every day...I feel like, when my mum came I couldn't give her and I couldn't take from her because my mum stayed the exact same as she was in Syria, as she raised us. But I changed. So she brought a little bit of Syria with her but I felt like that's what made me tired. (Alea)

In Alea's account we see how she struggles with the incompatibility between her old self (the one her mother expects to see), and who she feels she has now become. Being reminded of her former self appears to reduce the "social cure" effect her new identity provides. Unless she can find a way to make these important identities compatible, she continues to sacrifice one source of wellbeing to secure another.

## 7.4 | Theme four—Containment and constraint

Alongside their accounts of identity change were numerous encounters where the opportunity for identification was either closed down, or identities were frozen. In these situations, the resources or benefits that would normally be conferred through shared identity groups were unavailable. For the practicing Muslims, their experiences at the local mosque, which they positively anticipated, often jarred against their actual experience. It served to offer a glimmer of collective hope, only to dash it through violating expected social norms:

It's not like once you enter the mosque, we feel comfortable. Even the like variety of people when they come in, they don't say hi to you, no one is talking to you, it's very official. So, once you go somewhere that you're not comfortable with, so you're not benefiting from anything, so that's why I haven't been. (Masud)

A clear example of the impact containment has on wellbeing was given by Masud who explained that in trying to find similar Syrians and Arabs on his arrival to Brazil, he found people were only interested in his past identity, relating to the politics and conflict in Syria. Pathways towards discovering new identities or recovering existing ones were cut off. Later, when asked to select a stone that most represented other Arabs in Brasília, Masud quickly picked up a piece of sea glass:

I wanted them to talk to me in terms of this.... The type of questions that will construct my future, help build my future. I found out that they really didn't care about me... 'Cos when I first meet them they would ask me questions like "Are you with the government or against them? Are you wanted

back in Syria?" So, I choose this [sea glass]. Because this looks like glass, a bottle, and it hurts. It hurts. And the people here that are here they're like that, they hurt. (Masud)

Without the opportunity to talk with others and be truly understood, there was little space to express an identity other than that which the context or the interlocutor determined. This experience of being referred to in limited ways had a similar effect on the wellbeing of Alea's family when they were referred to as "refugees":

So the first question people would ask me, was like "oh you're a refugee right?" and to me I didn't take it sensitively, I would just laugh and say yes, but that word really hurt my daughters. (Alea)

Many shared this negative experience of being frozen by the categorisations of others. Within these situations, there was little room for negotiation or adaptation. Their future aspirations were inaccessible. In such contexts, the constraints were in place and there was no opportunity to construct, or re-construct, anything other than what had already been asserted.

## 8 | DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of these extended interviews suggests that SIMIC is a robust model for capturing many of the social identity complexities of post-migration life. The findings indicate the significance of identity gain ("Discovery") and continuity ("Recovery") to wellbeing, as well as the significant role played by identity construction ("Adaptation") in facilitating these pathways. This supports the growing evidence in favour of SIMIC to explain social identity change, and further supports research that highlights the need for compatibility as a precursor to wellbeing (Cruwys et al., 2016; Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2010). But this analysis also offers further insights that could allow the model to be elaborated. The findings reveal the impact of social identity constraint, the potential flip-side of adaptation, arising from the way in which context situates different identities, and how this constraint inhibits adaptation and change, thereby undermining wellbeing.

### 8.1 | Adaptation

This research demonstrates that the psychological impact caused by forced migration cannot be accounted simply in terms of losses and gains. Such changes are continually in flux as individuals move through their post-migration lives, shaped by every encounter they have and relationship they enter into. The participants in this study did not stop being the people they were before they arrived in Brazil, but they did struggle to find meaningful ways to express, re-construct and align those identities within their new lives. Identification is a process of construction, which as this analysis alongside others (Bentley et al., 2019; Cruwys et al., 2016; Iyer et al., 2009) shows is shaped by the particular contextual encounters of post-migration life. If we define identity as the dynamic process through which individuals come to understand themselves and others (Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003) then we can argue that without this active process of identification, identities may subside and wellbeing begins to wane. Construction is essential to ensure equivalence and meaning between past identities and new ones; it is the cornerstone of adaptation. As such, opportunities are needed that allow individuals to try to test how different identities align. As this study shows, when self-narratives are contested, old or different selves performed, and indeed, personal narratives shared with others (McAdams & Diamond, 1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013) compatibility can be experienced. And whilst this may not always be a positive experience, the sense of self arising from it, whether something new or existing, is often more meaningful and distinct. Whether individuals successfully adapt or not, therefore, is not simply a matter of personal willingness or ability, but whether the context enables such changes to at least be explored.

## 8.2 | Constraint

In the examples of containment and constraint analysed in our interviews we see social identity operating as a “social curse” (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012), causing greater post-migration stress not despite, but because of, the social identities they invoke. For example, in Alea's case, struggling to work was not only stressful because of the family responsibilities, but the stress was amplified because of pre-existing expectations from family back in Syria. Similarly, the absence of normative behaviour at the mosque not only signalled a failure of assistance or concern, but a failure to understand or identify with other members of that social group. As such, the familiar handrails that participants would normally look to in order to maintain important identities and guide their actions (Tajfel, 1972) were not only absent, but counter-normative.

Where particular categories had been rigidly conferred without giving participants the right to actively challenge or re-frame these identities, wellbeing was clearly affected. This, in turn, risked altering their own coping mechanisms. In Masud's example, the lack of positive engagement from other Arabs and the general sense of social marginalisation meant his only respite was when he “escaped home” and, in private, listened to the songs and stories from Syria. Whilst this bolstered his wellbeing in the short term, as Iyer and Jetten (2011) would argue, this nostalgia for a life no longer available can result in poorer psychological functioning as, in the absence of a meaningful alternative, it serves to remind them of the void in their present life. In this context, nostalgia serves to contain and freeze their own sense of self; a self-imposed identity constraint to temporarily confer a sense of stability and a meaning. We can, therefore, conclude that a significant cause of post-migration stress arises from the absence, denial or incompatibility of the means to identify in either existing or new ways.

## 8.3 | Limitations and future research

Whilst the number of case studies in this research was small ( $n = 5$ ), together the interviews made for a substantial corpus of over 40 hrs of rich, participant-led narrative. But these findings are not necessarily generalizable to the wider Syrian refugee population. Brazil's particular socio-economic circumstances and policies may create similar post-migration experiences for other refugees in Brasília, but these may not translate to Syrian refugees in other countries, or cities, where Syrian diasporas are more common, or social support is more available. But whilst the specific content of the themes in this research may differ across research environments, the dynamics of social identity change, in particular, identity gain and maintenance pathways, do suggest some wider validity, and should be investigated. Further research is also needed to explore the impact of identity constraint as part of an elaborated SIMIC. As constraint operates concurrently with more positive experiences of identity adaptation and discovery, the relationship between the two should be explored together.

Other limitations must be considered, such as the researcher's own identity as white, female and British imposing constraints through the interview process. Whilst efforts were made to build trust and relationships over time, the power, gender, cultural and linguistic disparity will have bought its own influence to bear on the stories the participants were willing to share. Further, only those who were willing to share their stories took part. This self-selecting sample may only represent those who have, or are able, to provide a meaningful account of their experiences. The principal researcher was acutely aware of those who she invited to participate but declined, for some because their experience was still too difficult to share. This serves as an important reminder that those who find cannot speak are examples of the disarming effect that can arise because for the incompatibility between their own post-migration experience and their sense of self (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012). Yet these stories are particularly valuable to our understanding of social identity change.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

This study explored whether the qualitative analysis of post-migration experiences develops our understanding of social identity change. The findings suggest that SIMIC (Iyer et al., 2009) provides an important framework for understanding post-migration life, and that the model should contribute to valuable, real world interventions. Further research should focus on the dynamic interplay between construction and constraint to provide a more situated understanding of the drivers of social identity gain and continuity. Doing so allows both the aspects of “social cure” (Jetten et al., 2012) and “social curse” (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012) to be examined, thereby potentially unravelling some of the complexity of the refugee identity landscape.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, SCB. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” (UNHCR, 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> IMDH is a social non-profit, philanthropic organisation whose mission is to promote the recognition of full citizenship of migrants and refugees <http://www.migrante.org.br/>.
- <sup>3</sup> For reasons of confidentiality, all participant names have been changed.
- <sup>4</sup> We would like to express our gratitude for the support and guidance Ayya provided throughout the interviews.
- <sup>5</sup> Ethics approval FSTREC ref: FST16098.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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